



Natural Resource Condition Assessment

Introduction

Natural Resource Condition Assessment (NRCA) projects evaluate and report current conditions, critical data gaps, and selected threat and stressor condition influences relative to a subset of important park natural resources and indicators. To accomplish this, they gather and interpret existing scientific data from a variety of National Park Service (NPS) and non-NPS sources. NRCAs assist park-based resource stewardship planning and decision making activities. They can also help parks report to “resource condition status” accountability measures as may be established by the Department of Interior and the Office of Management and Budget.

NRCAs represent a relatively new type of resource assessment project for NPS, one that departs from the types of literature reviews and issue scoping reports that park managers are more likely to be familiar with. Among their defining characteristics, all NRCAs:

- Assess indicator-level conditions and summarize overall condition findings by park areas;
- Emphasize geospatial (map) products in addition to narrative condition summaries;
- Apply a set of reference conditions (reference values) as the comparative basis for reaching current condition judgments;
- Use assessment frameworks to help guide the project work and report study findings;
- Document the data and methods used, and communicate critical data gaps along with uncertainties or level of confidence associated with the study findings.

Management Needs

NRCAs contribute to strategic resource stewardship. Because they are multi-disciplinary and emphasize condition reporting by park areas, they support a “systems level” approach to resource management and planning. Because they evaluate and report conditions relative to logical and documented forms of reference conditions and values, they contribute to ongoing efforts to describe and quantify a park’s desired resource conditions.

A successful NRCA has practical value to park managers for their ongoing efforts to:

- 1) develop near-term strategies and priorities—given limited park staffing levels and funding, what are park resources that deserve the greatest amount of attention right now;
- 2) engage in watershed or landscape scale resource partnerships and education efforts;
- 3) conduct formal planning to describe and quantify desired conditions for their most important resources, and to develop comprehensive strategies for how to best protect/restore those same resources;
- 4) report to “resource condition status” performance/accountability measures as instructed by the Department of Interior and the Office of Management and Budget

Current Procedures

A set of pilot assessment projects were initiated in 2006. As these projects were ongoing, additional projects were initiated in 2007 and 2008 with the to-date “lessons learned” informally incorporated into the subsequent year startups. In spring 2009, approximately 30 NPS personnel from Parks and Regional/Washington science-support offices gathered again to discuss “lessons learned” from the pilot projects and to development recommendations for new NRCA standards and guidance going forward.

As of fall 2009, a new set of project guidance was developed by the Washington office, incorporating feedback and lessons learned from the 2009 review process. Due by late fall 2009. Each Region has the option to propose a revised project management and funding model to the NRPC in the coming months. As part of this, Regions can consider whether they want to increase funding for their NRCA projects, thus lengthening the timeframe for completing one for all of their park units served by the Inventory and Monitoring Program. Regions can also consider whether they want to tap a modest amount of NRPC project funding from their annual project allocation to support the project management workload.

Work on the Shenandoah NRCA is scheduled to begin in the Fall of 2010.

More Information

In 2006, Shenandoah National Park staff members worked with an investigator from Pennsylvania State University in the preparation of a document titled “A Natural Resource Assessment for Shenandoah National Park”. This document was intended to provide a baseline of information that could be used in General Management Planning efforts.

At the time of development of this report, the Service was focused on preparation of Watershed Condition Assessments and was working on this exclusively in coastal parks. No Servicewide guidance on NRCAs existed.

The 2006 document clearly fills some of the same purposes as the NRCA but does not comply with current guidance now adopted by the Service.

In addition, Nature Serve has approached the Service and launched a series of pilot efforts aimed at developing information that would feed into the NRCA. Shenandoah has been selected to participate in that pilot effort. Nature Serve work is underway on this project.